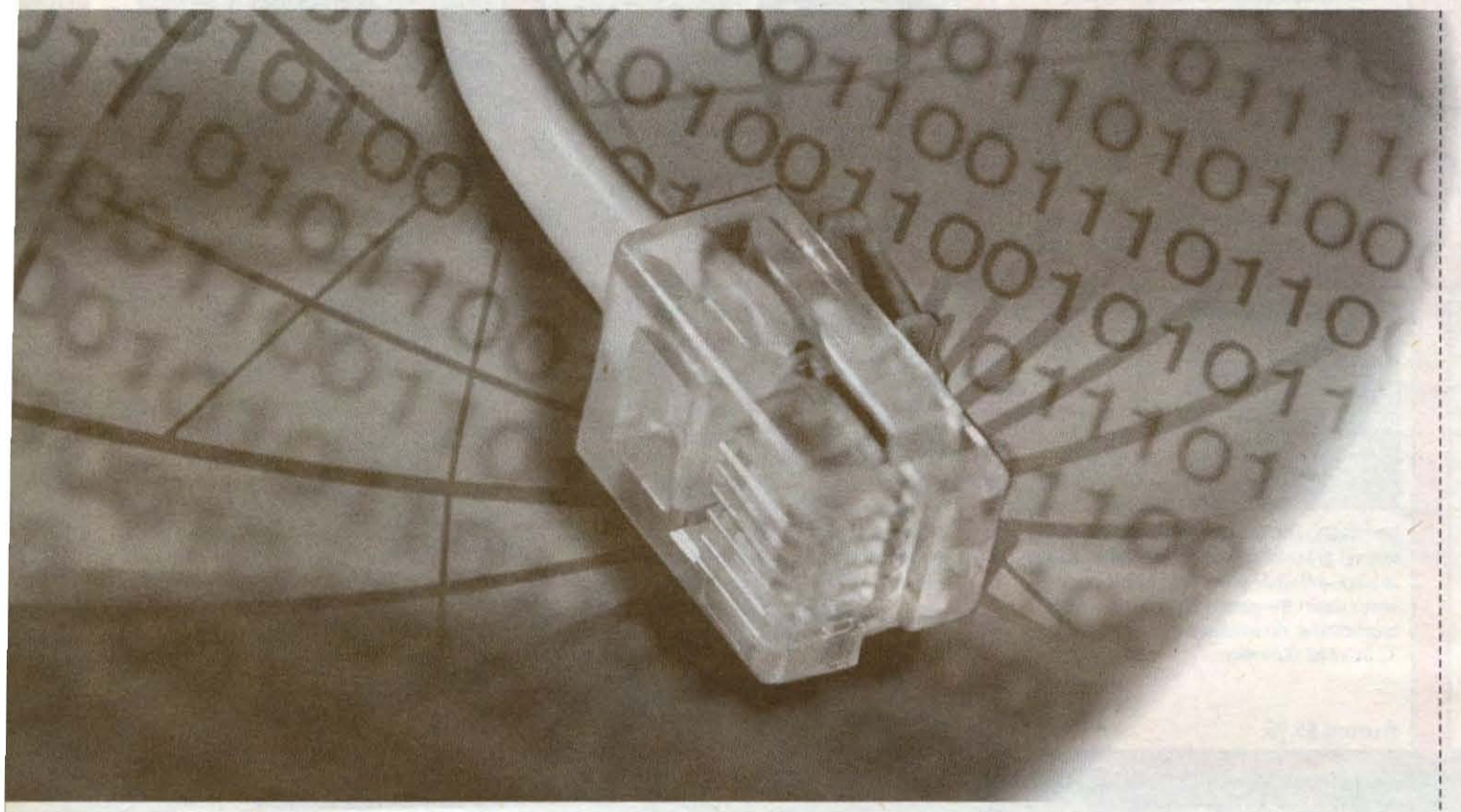
Lost and Found in Cyberspace

How will the Internet change us? How will we change it? What's real and what's virtual?



Internet pioneer Carl Malamud has built his career by asking the right questions. Esther Dyson—whose newsletter, Release 1.0, *is the most widely quoted publication of its kind in the computer industry—has made her name by providing smart answers.* Inside Borders *brought these two Internet giants together on-line to talk about our brave new world.*

Is cyberspace some new kind of virtual reality or is it an integral part of the "real world"?

Malamud: I've never thought of the Internet as some kind of new world. To me this is an infrastructure, no different than electricity, or water, or roads. Sure, the Net changes the way we live, but it changes the way we live in our cities and towns. We're not moving to some strange land called cyberspace.

Dyson: Unfortunately, I agree with Carl. But I would add that the Net does change the balance of power, because it makes it easier to compete with or bypass traditional power centers—big government, big business, big media, even big charity. But cyberspace lies on top of or around our existing world with all its familiar experiences and problems.

So that's why governments are so afraid of it?

Dyson: Yup. It's not that they are (most of them) evil people. Their job is to control things. They were either elected or appointed or took power in order to control things, to administer a system. And so when they see something new, their natural instinct is to control that, too. Actually, the U. S. government is doing a pretty good job of letting the Net grow itself, despite the near-miss with the Communications Decency Act.

Malamud: I've got to admit that I don't believe in the let-the-Net-grow-itself philosophy, at least not at the libertarian extreme. I agree wholeheartedly that there are lots of areas the government should not be involved in. For example, when the government has tried to set standards on a technical level, they have failed miserably. On the other hand, let's not forget that the government works for us, and there are useful things they can do. Our public parks are the result of government, our roads and other public goods all have some help from the government. So ... government control is nuts, but if Washington ever realizes that they are there to help us, there are some useful things they can do.

What, for example?

Malamud: Public works are the best example. Getting schools hooked up and teachers trained, giving a boost to the arts, or encouraging foreign trade.

Dyson: Schools, absolutely!!! But in fact, I would rather have good teachers than computers any day. My hope is that we could have both, and train the teachers to use the equipment. Education is really the key to almost everything. Government is also useful in law enforcement—prosecuting cases of fraud, for example. And our government to some extent has led the way in enlightened policies towards the Net—which may be why it is so advanced here. (On the other hand, some of the U.S. commercialism is excessive.)

Are you talking about spam?

Dyson: You mean (she says in expository mode) electronic junk mail? Yes, in part, but I also mean the prevalence of advertising everywhere, the use of sites just as selling tools, when in fact they can be information tools, discussion tools, delivery-of-value tools. This has a lot more to do with culture; believe me, I'm not hoping the government will step in and regulate it! It's just that I like the concept of the Net as a medium for personal expression or value delivery, rather than just a slightly more interactive television system. ... If anything, the Net is glorified telephone. We like the telephone when we use it with our friends, or with vendors we have called. We do not really like it when vendors use it to call us—unless they're responding to a specific question. We all still have a lot to learn about how to use it right. Companies will have a hard time; their nature is to sell, just as government's nature is to control.

What about consumers? Surely they must have something to learn, too?

Dyson: Aha! Gotcha! the first thing is that they have to stop being passive "consumers," and become active "suctomers" (oops, I meant customers, but what a wonderful error!) or even producers—of their own content, of interactive discussion, of their own personalities. But I have produced too much ... your turn, Carl!

Malamud: Wow! I get the last word on Esther Dyson. That has to be a first. Let me just comment on the "new medium" comments. I agree that this is not radio, or TV, or newspapers. When I started Internet Talk Radio, I called it radio but it was immediately clear that this was something new. My listeners were actively engaged (indeed too actively at times) and whenever we tried to be "like radio" we failed. Our most successful programs were the ones that engaged our listeners to an extent that traditional one-way media can't.

Mary Randall-Knopp

*Esther Dyson—The "doyenne of the digital age" (*Washington Post*), "the most powerful woman in the Net-erati," (*The New York Times*)—is president and owner of EDventure Holdings, a small but diversified company focused on emerging information technology worldwide, and the author of* Release 2.0: A Design for Living in the Digital Age *(Broadway, 1997).*

Carl Malamud, founder of the Internet Multicasting Service, is the author of eight books, most recently A World's Fair for the Global Village *(MIT Press, 1997). One of the first people on the front lines of the Internet revolution, he started a radio station in 1993, began badgering the U. S. government into putting huge databases on-line in 1994, and in 1996 brought these diverse activities together under the umbrella of an Internet World's Fair, an event that involved participants from 80 countries and attracted over 5 million visitors.*